

Pontius Pilate

Pontius Pilate was the Roman official who gave the final order for the crucifixion of Jesus. According to the gospels, he actually believed that Jesus was innocent, and wanted to save him, but was pressured into ordering his death by the Jewish religious leaders and a disorderly crowd of spectators.

Why did Pilate give in to the pressure even though he believed that Jesus was innocent? To try to answer this question, we first need to examine his previous life and how it may have affected his attitudes and his character.

Some evidence suggests that Pilate had served as an officer in the Roman army before he was sent to Judea. If so, he probably came from the equestrian (knightly) class of Romans, one step down from the senatorial class. But he may have gained some additional status through marriage, because one source says that his wife, Claudia Procula, was a niece of Emperor Tiberius.

He was appointed to his position in Judea in 26 AD, and held it for about ten years. His official title, *Praefect*, is usually translated as "governor". His two main duties were to keep order in the country and to make sure that all imperial tax revenues were collected and sent to Rome.

The Jewish historians Josephus and Philo describe Pontius Pilate as a stubborn, inflexible, and cruel man who had no respect for the Jewish people. Perhaps because of his military background, he may have sometimes used force when it wasn't necessary. On one occasion he told his soldiers to disguise themselves in civilian clothes, with their swords hidden under their cloaks, and mingle with a crowd of demonstrators. After they were in position, he signaled for them to pull out their weapons and attack. In the ensuing bloodbath, hundreds of people were killed.

But Pilate may not have been any more brutal than other governors of Judea, because harsh measures were often necessary to keep the province under control. Most of the population felt an intense hatred for the Romans, and any small dispute could quickly develop into a riot or uprising. Trouble was especially likely during the annual Passover festival, when people from all over the country gathered in Jerusalem. For that reason, Roman governors always made it a point to be in the city at that time.

It was during one such Passover festival that Jesus was brought before Pilate. The governor was apparently irritated at having to deal with the case, perhaps because it was brought to him quite early in the morning. The early start was prompted by the Jewish religious leaders, who evidently wanted quick action on the case. Some scholars have suggested that they pushed for quick action to allow less time for the followers of Jesus to organize a protest in his support. Because he was very popular among the common people, such a protest could have attracted large crowds and possibly even developed into a riot.



Christ before Pilate
by Mihaly Munkacsy (1844-1900)

Actually, most of the people in Jerusalem probably didn't even know that Jesus was in custody, because he had been arrested very late the previous night. A group of armed men, aided by the traitor Judas Iscariot, had seized him and brought him to the Jewish leaders. These leaders wanted to get rid of Jesus because many people believed that he was the Messiah, and this made him a threat to their religious authority. But they didn't want the general public to blame them for his death, so when morning arrived they took him to Pilate and accused him of claiming to be a king. Under Roman law, this was equivalent to rebelling against the emperor, an offense punishable by death.

The gospels make it clear that Pilate didn't want to give a death sentence, and repeatedly tried to find ways to avoid it. For example, when he was reminded that it was customary to free a prisoner during the festival, he tried to use this as an excuse to release Jesus. But an unruly crowd in the courtyard shouted for the freedom of a prisoner named Barabbas instead. Some scholars think that the Jewish leaders "packed" this crowd with their servants and henchmen, and thus were able to control it. In any case, Pilate became fearful that the crowd would get out of control, and so he released Barabbas instead of Jesus.

John 19:1-16 says that Pilate continued to look for a way to save Jesus, but finally gave up when the Jewish leaders threatened to report him to the emperor for not enforcing the laws against rebellion. Even then, according to Matthew 27:24, he washed his hands in front of the crowd in an effort to disassociate himself from any responsibility for the decision.

Thus, according to the gospels, Pilate was pressured into acting against his will. But some scholars doubt that this is what really happened. They argue that a former military commander like Pilate, who was accustomed to asserting his authority, and was known for his stubbornness, wouldn't have allowed himself to be controlled in this way. They also argue that his final decision to condemn Jesus was influenced by several other factors in addition to the pressure from the Jewish leaders. Here is a list of some possible other factors:

- As an upper-class Roman, Pilate wouldn't have put much value on the life of a lower-class Jew like Jesus.

- The question of guilt or innocence was probably of little importance to Pilate. During his time as governor, he must have sent many innocent people to their deaths. Jesus would just be one more.

- Because of previous difficulties with riots and uprisings, Pilate would have been predisposed to take strong action against anyone who might be a potential threat to the stability of the country. A man like Jesus, who had a large number of followers, could have appeared to be such a threat.

- Pilate sometimes needed the collaboration of the Jewish leaders on other matters. To try to stay on good terms with them, he would have paid attention to their wishes in this case.

Some scholars think that the gospel writers didn't mention these other factors because they wanted to put all the blame for the crucifixion on the Jewish leaders. Of course the Jewish leaders did play a essential role. They were clearly the main instigators, and the pressure they applied clearly had a strong influence. Thus they obviously do deserve a lot of the blame.

Yet surely some blame also has to go to Pilate. After all, he did make the final decision. And he probably knew that he was condemning an innocent man to death.

But because of what the gospels say, many people have believed that Pilate really wanted to save Jesus, and would have done so if he could. In fact a fourth-century book called *The Acts of Pilate* even suggested that the governor was a secret Christian. And in the sixth century he was declared a saint by the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches.

Pilate remained in office until 36 AD. He finally lost his position after he ordered an attack on a group of Samaritans who had gathered at one of their

holy sites. The resulting massacre aroused so much anger that he was suspended from office and ordered to return to Rome to explain his action. What happened in Rome is unclear, but he apparently never came back to Judea.

There are conflicting stories about how he finally died. The early church historian Eusebius wrote that he committed suicide in 39 AD. But according to a legend, he lived until the reign of Nero and then died a horrible death in France, his body being eaten by worms.

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